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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses some of the problems that might be encountered by black female college administrators and suggests several methods by which they may acquire and maintain power. Particular attention is given to the role that black administrators can play in helping black students in white institutions overcome various forms of discrimination and achieve success. Specific responsibilities that black administrators in white institutions might assume are outlined. Suggestions are also offered as to ways that will help black female administrators deal with the situation of working in a traditionally white male field. (EB)

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Black Women and Power: Perspectives from Black Women Administrators

NAWDAC 1979 Annual Conference

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BLACK WOMEN AND POWER: PERSPECTIVES FROM BLACK WOMEN ADMINISTRATORS

One possesses power if she/he has the authority to exercise control or influence in a given situation. To administrators in institutions of higher learning, power includes the authority to form policy, to develop, modify, and implement programs, and the freedom to make decisions that affect the lives of students.

While the numbers of Black administrators in historically white institutions has increased rather dramatically in the last two decades, the freedom and autonomy to affect change has often been in question. According to Moore and Wagstaff (1974), 94 percent of the Black administrators on white campuses fill some type of "assistant to" position. Hale (1975) has noted that glaring inequalities in terms of power and autonomy exists when Black administrators are compared to their white counterparts.

If one is to examine significant historical events, beginning in the 50's up to the present time, it becomes apparent that Black administrators began to enter previously "untrodden terrain" as legal, political, and societal pressures were exerted. The landmark 1954 Supreme Court Decision, Brown vs the Board of Education, set the stage for many of the events of the turbulent 60's. As Black people began to perceive that equal access to education was a legal right, they began to press for various changes within the educational system and society as a whole. The assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King shocked the world and appealed to the consciousness of many of those administrators already in positions of power at white universities. The raging fury of many Black militants created concern from others who desired to return to "law and order" and more peaceful times. White universities, out of a sense of overwhelming guilt coupled with Black community pressure, began massive recruiting

efforts to increase the number of Black students on their campuses (Hale, 1975). As students began to enter these institutions, the lack of Black administrators and faculty was glaring. In response to student demands, and the need to develop support services for these newcomers, a few Black professionals began to gradually appear. While the role of the faculty was understood, the function of administrators, in many instances, was not clearly defined. They were, in many instances, employed to control militant and restless students. While it was sometimes felt that Black administrators were needed to assist in the development and implementation of "compensatory programs" in more instances than not, the responsibilities and functions were nebulous.

Those of us who entered the administrative arena during this period, learned to understand that the ability to have influence in higher educational settings was not automatic. Clark (1977) has noted that the Black administrator comes to the job with certain handicaps but that these handicaps are not insurmountable. The Black administrator must be aware that his/her judgements and capabilities may initially be questioned. It is, therefore, imperative that one is "thick skinned" and has the ability to perform in stressful situations. It is apparent that no administrator in an institutional setting will have total power in all instances. Some of the major determinants of power, however, are as follows:

1. The freedom to make decisions.
2. The ability to develop and set policy.
3. The authority to develop and implement programs.
4. The ability to influence overall changes within the institutional structure.
5. The ability to secure a philosophical and financial commitment from the institution to compensatory programs.

Strategies used to acquire and retain power may vary depending on the administrative position and the administrative style of the individual. Basically several methods can be effective. They are as follows:

1. Be confident. A positive self-image is crucial if one is to perform in an administrative position. When one possesses a positive self-concept he/she can influence the perceptions that others have of him/her and the administrative position.
2. Be competent. The ability to perform effectively and to possess a willingness to learn, is one of the major characteristics of a successful administrator. The ability to accept a challenge and to act decisively is also a major asset.
3. Utilize methods to persuade others to be supportive. Publicize your function and responsibilities.
4. Be authentic. Some female administrators have felt compelled to assume "masculine" administrative characteristics. While assertiveness may be desirable, aggression often creates defensiveness in others. To assume a masculine role, female administrators may reduce their effectiveness. Develop a personal administrative style.
5. Set priorities. Determine your function as an administrator. Examine the duties that you are to perform and how to efficiently and effectively carry out responsibilities. Be willing to delegate responsibilities, provide supervision, and actively seek suggestions from others on how to accomplish desired goals.
6. Identify major strengths and weaknesses. Learn to accentuate major strengths and develop methods to improve in areas where there may be deficiencies.

The Black administrator in white institutions frequently realizes that he/she is expected to be all things to all people. Expectations from students may be such that the administrator cannot and, in many instances, should not alleviate the students' problem or intercede on their behalf. When it is clear, however, that students are sincere in their requests for assistance, the Black administrator must be sensitive to student needs. Black administrators will find that a considerable amount of time will be spent in counseling and advising students and serving as advocates on their behalf. In many instances the student may merely need to be reassured that he/she has the potential to succeed. The female Black administrator also serves a unique function as role model for the Black female student who needs support.

Black students usually perceive power in terms of how an administrator can alter situations and make decisions that positively affect their lives. Boyd (1973) has noted that one out of every two students feels that he/she has been discriminated against. Various forms of discrimination are experienced by students. Institutionalized racist practices are difficult to identify and even more difficult to change. The effective Black administrator will, however, acknowledge the possibility of discrimination and will devise methods to alter adverse situations. Black students may also feel isolated and abandoned once they enroll in a primarily white university. Crucial to the success of the student are the following:

1. An appropriate admissions decision and continuous academic advising which considers the cultural background and personal needs of the student.
2. Availability of adequate financial resources.
3. Supportive services that foster positive psychological well-being and cultural stimulation.

In summary, students generally view power in terms of the administrator's sensitivity to the aforementioned issues and the ability of the administrator to develop and implement institutional policy that is supportive in this regard.

While much of the administrator's time may be spent in direct interaction with students, the administrator must also engage in activities to create a positive academic and sociocultural environment for them. Hale (1975) lists three responsibilities that Black administrators, in white universities should assume:

1. The Black administrator has a responsibility, along with others, to design, develop and promote curricular innovations that meet the unique needs of Black students.
2. The Black administrator is responsible for helping the institution to become as sensitive to the needs of the non-academically-oriented student as to those of the highly motivated student.
3. The Black administrator must never cease to challenge the institution to fulfill its obligations to students once they are recruited.

With regard to other external perceptions, the Black female administrator in white institutions may be at a disadvantage when judged by other non-Black administrators. Being Black and female in an arena that is basically white and male, she is generally suspect and may be limited in her ability to affect change. Others perceptions of her power are determined, in part, on how she develops policy and makes decisions that directly relate to duties, responsibilities, and her role within the university. The first impression is frequently negative in that both women and Blacks have traditionally been viewed as being inferior. The Black woman must prove she is competent rather than expect that she will be assumed so purely on the basis of the position that she holds.

Black women who are entering administrative positions must learn how to be effective and remain calm; render superior performance and remain sane. The following are a few suggestions:

1. Assess institutional political structure.
2. Gain diverse experiences.
3. Become involved in entire administrative structure. (At all costs avoid isolation.)
4. Attend professional meetings to gain suggestions and emotional support from other women in the field.
5. Understand your administrative role and function accordingly.
6. Be willing to confront institutional bureaucracy.

An administrative position in an institution of higher learning can be a challenging but rewarding opportunity. Black women who are involved in administration must begin to identify unique problems which they have in common and utilize support systems that are available to them. Because we represent a unique minority, every effort must be made to communicate with other women in the field. Through these exchanges, women entering the profession can begin to gain insights and skills to increase their effectiveness and enhance their overall professional growth.

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